Signet

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Photo by ERIN ROSE RYAN

The Epitome of Politeness

She tells this story as though
it were true and I believe her.
It was a faceless, foggy night in London
as she left the party, bidding a
hardy farewell to her host when a flasher
stepped from behind a lamppost.

His well-educated, low-modulated voice
became inspired and in his best dressed
British accent he inquired, "Pardon me Madam,
would you care to see my penis?"

Caught off-guard by the politeness and
lack of meanness she matched his manners
and (though seething) coolly replied,
"no thank you, not this evening."

Thinking that was that, she was more aghast
as he tipped his hat and smiled and
with a voice most sublime said "very well,
perhaps another time."

Jan Wolf

(Signet Creative Writing Award—2nd Place Poetry)

Two dirt tracks joined where the sumac grew,
burnt red antlers arching over our meeting place.
He approached with the style of one
who is at home in a field:
easy rambling steps belying alert, darting eyes.
We spread our jackets on prickly dried weeds
and watched afternoon light brighten
November's warm colors.
The sun played Midas,
gliding whatever it touched.

Mammon tempted me, and I succumbed.
I ran my fingers through golden curls:
a miser dipping into treasure.

One weakness led to another, and
luster became a glow.

Carleton Montgomery

You—
even when viewed
in my most critical light
sparkle
Like
oh so many
bits of crushed
bottle glass
Spread
on the
hot
summer sidewalk.

Carla Van Cleave

Hero

I knew there was a mistake the moment I opened the box. Instead of the three foot, greenish-metal servo mechanism that I ordered, there was a beautiful humanoid servo instead. I took the robot out of the box, stood him up and just let my tongue drip from the side of my mouth. He was like a dream. His six-foot-two frame towered over me. Broad and muscular shoulders connected to a wide chest and his waist tapered like one of those dogs on the side of buses. His legs were lean, like a jogger's, but not skinny. (I never did like skinny-legged men) and his entire plasto-derm was dotted with synthetic hair. The muscular, almost squat neck held up one of the most amazing faces I'd ever seen. It appeared to be chiseled out of granite, the features hard but covering hidden passions. The steel blue eyes gleamed behind the sleepy eyelids. A shock of blue-black hair fell casually onto his broad forehead. His lips were full, firm, sensuous with a hint of treachery. There was something slightly dangerous and very exotic about his features. An aura of musky aftershave enveloped him.

"They've made a mistake," I said, gulping painfully as I stood in front of this superman. "This isn't the one I ordered."

"So who cares?" said Susan. She's my roommate. "He's gorgeous!"

"Well, I guess I'd better return him," I said.

"Are you crazy?" she yelled. "This tall, dark and handsome guy looks like one of those new hero-servo models they're putting out. I've read about them. They're outrageously expensive—only rock stars and actresses can afford them. And here you have one delivered right into your living room and you want to return him? Crazy!" She made a circling gesture around her right ear to reiterate her opinion.

"But I wanted a servo to help me with the housework and at the office and . . ."

"Look at him," she said, pointing to the machine that nearly pulsed with sexuality. "He's the best looking thing I ever laid my eyes on. Tell me, are you ever going to get another opportunity like this? Would you really rather have a bucket of tin cans or this gorgeous hunk?"

She had a point. I checked the carton again and on the front typed neatly by computer was my name, address and the logo of the Atlas Servo Manufacturing Company. On the side of the box printed in three inch Bodoni Bold typeface was the information: Archetypal Hero Male Servo, deluxe model. Extra wigs and accessories included. Load on top. Open other end."

I scavenged around the box and found a brown wig that reminded me of Humphrey Bogart's hairdo and a pale blond wig a la Robert Redford. Also included was a curly afro style wig and several accessories including a gold cigarette lighter and a pair of sunglasses.

"I guess I'll have to buy him some clothes. He can't go out like that," I said. The servo was wearing skin tight chartreuse bikini swimming trunks. He appeared to be anatomically correct.

"So who cares if he never goes out?" Susan asked.

"Well, I need him to work. That's why I got a servo afterall," I answered with irritation. I had saved my money for four years—four long years of skimping on clothes, reading second-hand magazines from the doctor's office and skipping vacations, just to buy a servo to make my life easier.

They are invaluable, you know. You can program them to do most of the routine, boring work at home or at the office. For instance, you can tell it what you like to eat and it will figure up a balanced menu, calculate the cost per meal and per dish, include a calorie count and help you pick out the best bargains in the grocery stores. And lots of people use them at work. They can calculate, of course, and operate the duplicating machines, if you program them correctly and even answer the phone and record a message from the caller. Of course, they are very expensive. I had ordered a Level 7 servo, out of 20 levels, 20 being the most complicated and useful, and it had cost me all my spare change for four years. I couldn't even imagine how much this fellow had cost.

I glanced briefly over the instructions and twisted the servo's on/off switch carefully concealed in the gold charm dangling from a chain around his neck.

"Hello, gorgeous, where have you been all my life?" he said. His voice was rich, dark and mellow like aged wood. Well, maybe he was better than my Stage 7 servo afterall.

The next day, Susan and I spent the entire morning cleaning up our apartment. We had to get it perfect and spotless before we programmed Hero. Then, his electronic sensors would record the entire scene, noting where each item belonged and the condition of each glass table top and houseplant and from then on he would take care of everything for us. At least, that's the way it's supposed to work. But, when I switched him on, he looked at me with what I would have sworn was a glint in his eye and said, "Hey baby, what's a great looking dame like you doing in a joint like this?"

Truthfully, I was a little offended. Afterall, Susan and I had spent hours cleaning the place and had spent months decorating it ourselves. But, the annoying thing was that instead of surveying the apartment, he just clicked off. When I switched him on again, he repeated his compliment and clicked off again. Apparently his circuitry wasn't programmed to clean. It looked like Susan and I would be doing housework afterall.

A few days later, after I had a chance to buy Hero some clothes, I took him to the supermarket to help me shop. I thought I'd start with something simple like calculating the cost per ounce of the various canned items. I always hate doing that. But when I flicked the switch he just said, "You're irresistible," and bent me back over his knee and gave me a lingering kiss. It was supposed to be romantic, I guess, but I could feel the hard metal under his plasto-derm lips and I never was one much for machines anyway.

Well, I went ahead and finished shopping myself, calculating ounces and even pushing my own cart. Afterwards, we went into the coffee shop next door for a cup of Sanka. I hate eating in restaurants alone, so I was kind of glad to have Hero with me. I programmed his circuits for conversation and switched him on. To my surprise, he whipped out his lighter and offered me a light while saying: "Let me take you away from all of this." Then he switched off.

Well, I don't even smoke and I was starting to get a little upset now. Did this machine do any of the things that a simple Level 7 could do?

Back at the apartment, I told Susan of my problems and we both poured over the directions again. Apparently Hero was such a new model that they had either failed to write up specific instruction for him or else just forgotten to put them in the box. We fooled around with the programming circuits on his box and I flipped on the switch again.

"Ju-dy, Ju-dy, Ju-dy," he said this time while furrowing his brow.

"Huh?" I asked. I was confused since my name is Mary.

"Oh it's something that Cary Grant was supposed to have said in some movie," Susan informed me.

"Oh," I muttered and fiddled with the dials again. His musky aftershave seemed to be a little heavy-handed. It irritated my nostrils. I flipped on the starter.

"You and me babe could make beautiful music together," he said with a wink.

Now I was getting pretty annoyed.

"Maybe he can cook," Susan said. "You know a lot of hero types can cook. At least bacon and eggs or chili or something."

So we led him into the kitchen and tried to program him to cook but when it was time to crack the eggs, the only thing he said was, "Come with me to the Casbah," with a devilish shake of his head. I was exasperated now.

"You can't clean, you can't cook, you can't calculate What are you good for anyway, you overgrown Ken doll?" I shouted at the machine.

"You're so beautiful when you're angry," he said coolly.

Susan had to physically restrain me to prevent me from tearing that darn machine apart, from syntho-limb to lyntho-limb. "He's defective, that's all," she yelled above my ranting. "We'll send him back and get him repaired. There's just a few loose circuits or something. Hey, calm down."

I did calm down and we crated him up, lugged him down to the post office and mailed him off. A few weeks later, I received a package from the Atlas Servo Manufacturing Company and it was the three-foot metal model I had originally ordered. It cooks and cleans and calculates. It really is a wonderful machine. Worth every penny I spent.

I wonder sometimes, though, about the hero model. Was the one I received a lemon or were they all programmed like that? I still remember what it said as Susan and I were crating it up. I was still pretty hot and I yelled at it: "You're nothing but a bunch of hot air and cold metal. I'm getting rid of you, Buster."

Hero looked up at me through his steel blue eyes, a devilish twist on his sensuous mouth. "Frankly my dear," he said, "I don't give a damn."

Margaret T. Kelso

At the zoo, the clear cold turns
our cheeks wine-red, the children
are small bundles of confetti, blowing
from cage to cage, while hand-in-hand and
toe-to-toe we kiss, oblivious to all but the
animal in ourselves.

•

Life nibbles us like little lips
all about our bodies, until swirling
around the universe we mingle in and
out of each other.

•

Propped on one elbow I watched you
sleep, hoping your eyelids would flutter
open, warming my naked body in the sunshine
of your eyes.

•

I watched your eyes watching mine—
they laugh at each other, and at us.

•

My nose fits into the curve
of your neck, the smell of
you fills my senses and I
am high beyond all reason.

Jan Wolf

Passing Notion

Never knew I'd long
to be cuddled
  like a teddy bear—a mere toy;
the way I needed to
last night.
  No lust
    or
  Kinky thoughts in mind.
  Just to be held
    touched
    caressed
    loved
  Yeah, like a teddy bear—a mere toy;

Seeking child erotica—
for a moment
  Just one moment.

Karen Rollins

Intermission

I remember
When we rode bikes in the rain
  I didn't see the car,
And you said your heart stopped.
Your arm trembled when you hugged me.
But I laughed because
  I was drenched
  And I was fine.

Do you remember
  the first time I cut your hair?
  You complained
  But it looked good anyway.
    You taught me
    to crack crabs
      change oil
  and believe in me.

Remember the day
  We flew kites?
  My string broke
  and my kite floated above us—
    laughing
  We chased it until it was a speck
    in a huge sky.

  Do you ever think about that?
Or how we used to talk about
  music
    and
      sports
        and
          babies
            and
              our future?

You turned
a miserable parking lot into
a field of flowers.
The ring was perfect
      I cried
      You cried
  In that parking lot
      I was happy
      You were happy
  And I said I'd never go.
      Do you remember that?

  I do.
But it's pushed back among
  wilted roses
    faded letters
      and
      fuzzy pictures of fuzzy smiles.

Remember how you used to say
You would write a book?
  Our Story.
  "The Great American Love" right?
    (wrong)

Well, maybe this is just the movie version.
  And maybe this is just intermission.
  And maybe I'm just waiting.
    Waiting for you to come back and
    put your arm around me
  Then the picture can start again.

Erin Rose Ryan

Born as a night—
  in haste and beauty.
Enveloping glances,
Smiles,
A touch.
Bliss,
  quietly.
No words needed.
Without them it is "us."
Fusion starts.
Communion of two,
  one becoming.
Perfect peace in darkness.
Gone at dawn.

Carol Ann Hunter

Another Try At Poetry — For You

Such unbidden and bold eagerness as this
  is new to me —
the anxiousness and searching to find
your smile across a distance.
With that one simple gesture comes peace
  and the satisfaction that I have, in you, a friend.
They say that "a friend in need is a friend indeed."
Well, I'm in need —
  of you.
Tell me that you'll stay there nearby for a while,
continuing light conversation
with dark eyes sparkling.
Your eyes,
  beautiful as they are,
add so much to an instant with you.
I don't know what I hope to find there —
a lover, maybe,
or a lifestyle.
I've yet to find anything
but a fading hope of things to come,
  you seeming slightly indifferent after this try at honesty.
Promises
  I can't make to you.
I can only say yes
to dreams of you
  long enough to test their reality.
And I do it fearful of my foolishness.
Be gentle with me.
Fantasies turned nightmares
destroy all dreams, all reality of you.

Carol Ann Hunter

And I will never forget the rush —
Oh, there was a rush —
And my wish almost came true . . .

Now, the song is over —
the sun's set, a new moon
May rise tonight, as I remember you.

As I remember,
You never believed in wishes
And when my new moon rises
— The first star whispers to me,
I'll wish for you —
  A new moon —
  A sky of stars —
A chance to begin again.
One falling star for you
to catch, forever hold
in the palm of your hand.

One that will never, ever fade.

Tonya Wertz

I was alone in the sunset
  afraid, unsure, confused —
And as the last flicker died
  on the horizon —
    Darkness
then —
  I felt a warm, strong touch
And turning,
  I saw the promise
    of a sunrise in your eyes
So you shared the darkness
  with me
    and proved the dawn.

Carla Van Cleave

Antagonize Old Lady Gill
next time you're playing in grandmother's yard

Sense her cat eyes, gawking
behind dark kitchen windows at dusk
eyes like searchlights
piercing holes in dull glass and in your skin

and climb into the black arches of Dearest's dogwood,
all four of you
shake limbs and branches
until skin is broken by rough, jagged bark
leaves come unglued and flutter to ground
cut the air with shrill shrieks and sounds.

Feel the smarts of close-range venomed darts
The glares she shoots into the tender flesh of
innocence at play
while her hands
masculine, glove-covered
pluck and twist
the pink-red buds of Dearest's azaleas

Then march in two's like soldiers down the drive,
beside the azalea row
each bush a midget soldier ready for attack
she is standing guard behind,
a possessive lover ready to kill

You advance and stand by the hedge
Her eyes and mouth fire continuously

"Get off my property"
shoot
throb
"Get away from my azaleas or I'll call the
Police

But you
blast her ears with nothingness
play horrid tricks on her bulging eyes
and make her nerves sizzle like
electric currents
as you stand motionless

Emily Elyea

Fantasy

Life is all a fantasy,
a never ending rhyme,
a tapestry of memories,
a mural of our minds.

Mary Nethercutt

Azure Blue

She walks beneath the azure sky,
The sunlight in her hair,
The music of the nesting birds
Erase not her despair.

And why she deigns to weep
When skies are azure blue,
I cannot know, nor can I guess,
Or even find a clue.

I only know she cannot see
The beauty of the day,
For trouble locked within her breast
Has stolen the view away.

It seems a pity and great shame
That she is sore distressed,
Nor all the friends who comfort her
Can put her soul at rest.

And so beneath the azure blue
Amid the lush green trees,
She walks and talks but never hears
The songbirds' symphonies.

And so goes life for many souls
Who cannot share their pain,
When all the world is azure blue,
The only feel the rain.

Gay Simpson Culler

The Birthday Present

The lettuce was brown on the edges. Constance Hopper caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror which slanted back over the limp celery and hothouse tomatoes. She frowned. Once upon a time Constance would have smiled, but she chose not to reflect on the past and concentrated on testing the firmness of green peppers.

A long silver wisp of hair fell lightly from the severe knot on the nape of her neck. The grey was not uncommon these days to Constance, but she chose not to fight it, but rather let age fall over her like a soft snow on a lonely field.

Her hands were long and slender, like a young girl's. They did not tremble as she lifted the heavy potatoes to the scale. The tiny age spots were hardly noticeable. If a man were to look at Constance Hopper, he might think her attractive in a stern and tailored way, but she carried along with her an air of independence, almost an outward defiance of admiring glances. Constance Hopper was a woman to be reckoned with. She had not time for mirrors or lipstick or an appreciative glance.

Today was Miss Constance Hopper's 42nd birthday. There would be no cake or candles, no one would sing happy birthday or give her presents. Constance had no time for such frivolities. She had taken the day off from work, a prominent law firm where she managed books, typed court cases, filed letters, and took her coffee breaks alone.

Constance pushed her half-full cart to the checkout lane. Her mind was preoccupied with pick-up dates for drycleaning and silver that was due for polishing. Her mind drifted back fifteen years, to when she had picked out her own silver pattern. Mother didn't approve. Mother always found fault with Constance. Her taste in silver, in clothes and in her now lost fiance. But Mother was also gone. Seven years ago she had stopped finding fault and Constance was left totally alone.

The bored, tired voice of the checkout girl brought Contance back into the market. She wrote out a check for her purchase, picked up two full bags and left the store.

Miss Constance Hopper didn't notice the way the dairyman smiled as she walked by. His shy, timid wave also went unnoticed.

Alfred Benson momentarily forgot the pound of butter in his massive hand. He thought only of Constance. For some odd reason he didn't mind the fact that she never smiled back.

For the past ten years Alfred Benson delivered milk and eggs to the Hopper residence, but had only exchanged a few words with Constance. But who, besides Alfred, is up at 4:30 a.m. every morning? She paid her bill on time. Always on the first of every month. Alfred remembered also how Constance's Mother had died at the end of May, and the bill was paid the very next day along with a note, stating that there would be a reduction in her dairy needs. There was only person living in the Hopper House now.

Alfred sighed and wished he were a handsome man. Maybe then Constance would smile at him.

Mr. Alfred Samual Benson was the senior driver for the sunshine Clover Dairy Company. He was a stocky, little man, who looked like a fire hydrant with bright blue eyes and a painfully shy manner. Children loved Alfred. He always had some extra ice cream to give them, and never got angry if they hid the empty milk bottles which were left on the steps of their homes.

Alfred finished stocking the shelves of the small market, left the bill at the grocery manager's desk and went out to his truck. As he shifted the white van into gear, his thoughts began to roam again.

Alfred pictured himself walking up the front porch steps of a large white frame house. He was neatly dressed in his best blue Sunday suit. And if he stared long and hard enough, he could see a blurry reflection of himself in his spotlessly shined shoes. He had a large bouquet of red roses in one hand and a box of candy in the other. He pressed the doorbell and stood waiting. He imagined he heard the distant sound of heeled shoes in the hallway. And then the door opened. Constance Hopper stood there, her hair was loose and flowing. She wore a long white gown and a delicate strand of pearls encircled her slim neck. "Alfred," she spoke, "I've been waiting . . ."

The blaring, harsh sound of a car horn, followed by the impatient driver's voice startled Alfred. He hadn't realized he was daydreaming. He seemed to catch himself daydreaming more and more in the past few weeks. It had seemed so real. Alfred felt as if he could have reached out and brushed a strand of hair from Constance's cheek. A sad look came over his face. He caught the expression in his rearview mirror. He was disgusted. Alfred felt like a coward. For ten years he had wanted to speak to Constance, and all he could do was dream of her. He felt cheated and frustrated. Why couldn't he do it? Why did he freeze everytime he saw her? He felt tears of anger and heartache well up in his eyes. "No!" This outburst was so uncommon in Alfred, he surprised himself.

"I won't wait any longer!" The power of his own words gave him the boost of confidence he needed. He swung his truck around and headed towards the street where Constance lived.

Constance finished putting her groceries away and went upstairs to her bedroom to change. She had planned earlier to take herself out to dinner, but after she left the market she changed her mind. It was such a waste; better to catch up on her reading, then leave her mind open to wander. She hated going out to eat alone anyway. She thought about calling one of the other secretaries from work. No, behind her cool exterior she felt out of place among the couples and lovers whispering together.

She hung up her handsome, but plain, grey wool dress and slipped on a dull green bathrobe. As she tied the belt, she observed herself in the mirror behind the door. She was slim and tall. But the overall effect made Constance feel like she was missing something, as if she had a hollow look. She looked around the room for the novel she was reading. It was a large and sunny room, with a yellow carpet, brightly flowered wallpaper and beautiful french provincial furniture. Constance looked strangely out of place in this room. She had redecorated it after her mother's death. The rest of the house still had an oppressive and dark manner. As soon as Constance saved enough money, she would redecorate the whole house. But for now, she had to settle with her own bedroom. The atmosphere was better there.

Alfred parked his van across the street from Constance's house. He had all but lost his nerve, but he was not going to let himself give up. As he stepped out of the van, he looked down at himself. He had on his white dairyman's uniform. It was late afternoon, and he had been up since dawn. The creases in his white pants were beginning to fade and his black bowtie was starting to droop. He sighed. This was not how he imagined it at all. He removed his cap, and while looking in his rear view mirror, combed his thinning black hair. He replaced the cap at a jaunty angle thinking it made him look younger. He was afraid Constance wouldn't remember his name, so he repinned his name tag up higher. The tag read, ALFRED S. BENSON, SR. DRIVER, SUNSHINE CLOVER DAIRY CO. The tag was almost shoulder level. He did not want her to miss it.

Alfred took a deep breath and started to cross the street, but he stopped in the middle, turned around and trotted back to his van. He looked in the rear view mirror once again, and this time he straightened his cap. This, he thought, made him look more distinguished. Alfred walked slowly across the street. Something was wrong. There was something missing . . . "flowers!" He said it out loud. He had forgotten about flowers. He did not want to go empty-handed and it was too late to turn back. He knew if he left, he would never have enough nerve to return. He couldn't bring a pint of cream, that was ridiculous. Alfred looked around him. In the yard next to Hopper's was a small patch of tired, but stubborn daisies. It was early October, and most of the summer flowers were gone. Alfred decided that they didn't look bad. He looked at the house. No one seemed to be home. He hoped they wouldn't mind one of their daisies being picked as he bent and plucked up a small bloom. Then with his head held high underneath the perfectly straight cap, Alfred Benson climbed Constance Hopper's front porch steps. His heart was pounding so hard, he felt sure she would hear it through the door. He closed his eyes. One hand clutched the single timid daisy. The other hand rang the bell.

Upstairs in her room, Constance could not keep her mind on her book. She felt restless and uneasy. She put the book back on the desk, picked up her brush and pulled the hairpins out of her hair. It was long and thick and fell almost to the small of her back. She began brushing her hair with long slow strokes, being careful not to break off any loose ends.

The low dull timbre of the doorbell startled her. Constance put down her hairbrush and for a split second felt her heart beat faster. It wasn't the paper-boy. This wasn't the right day. She didn't speak much with her neighbors, so who else could it be? Constance sighed. It was probably one of those door-to-door salesmen or maybe some religious cult asking for a donation while they handed you a little white card saying your soul was saved. She stood up and reached for her purse. It was easier to give a dollar or two than to try and politely tell them you weren't interested in having eternal life.

Outside, Alfred listened intently. He heard nothing. Maybe she wasn't home he thought. But her late model Ford was parked in the driveway. His hands began to sweat and he seriously considered leaving. Right when he was turning around and heading for the safety of his truck, he heard a low soft voice say, "yes, can I help you?"

Alfred Samuel Benson froze in his tracks. Constance had to repeat the question two more times before Alfred turned around. Even then he could not face her. He stared awkwardly at his shoes. "Are you alright?" Constance asked. Alfred looked into her eyes. "Oh yes ma'm, Miss Hopper, I'm just fine ma'm." The words tumbled out of his mouth. His expression then took on a blank look. He closed his mouth, and with a deep scarlet blush edging up his face, Alfred continued to inspect his shoes.

Constance gazed at the man puzzled. Then a glimmer of recognition appeared in her eyes. "You're my milkman!" she blurted out. Then embarassed by her own outburst, she too looked down at her fuzzy green slippers.

"Yes ma'm!" Alfred was delighted.

"Oh, well," Constance started, "if it's about my bill, Mr. Uh . . . um," she glanced at his name tag, "Mr. Benson, I've never missed . . ."

"Oh, no ma'm!" Alfred interrupted, "It's not about your bill, why you're one of my best customers."

"Then, what can I do for you Mr. Benson?" Alfred paused, mentally searching for words. "Please Miss Hopper, please call me Alfred and I just came by to um to . . ." He glanced at the limp daisy in his hand, . . . "to give you this." Alfred thrust the flower at Constance. She jumped back a bit at his sudden movement and pulled her robe a little closer around her.

"For me?" "You brought this flower for me?" Constance's hand shook just a little as she accepted the single daisy. There was a quiet moment as Constance held the flower up to her face. "Thank you Mr. Benson," she smiled, "Alfred—thank you Alfred."

Alfred Benson felt such a relief at that moment he had to hold back a long sigh he felt in his chest. "I wish it was more ma'm, do you suppose that maybe I could call you Constance?"

Constance smiled. It had been a long time since a man had called her by her first name. "Please come in and sit for awhile, Alfred."

Alfred looked at her. He seemed to notice her bathrobe and slippers for the first time. He also saw her purse and wondered why she carried it. "I could come back another time if that's more convenient . . ."

"No!" Constance spoke too soon, and she was embarassed at the urgency and insistence in her voice. "No, I mean, I was just reading a book, and I really wasn't interested in it anyway . . ." Her voice trailed off. Constance looked at Alfred. In her eyes, there was no urgency or pleading, but they were shining and Alfred felt that Constance really wanted him to stay. "I would love to stay," Alfred smiled. There was an awkward moment as they both stood on the porch. Constance still held her purse and the daisy. Without speaking, she turned and walked back into the house. Alfred hesitated, but then followed Constance through the door.

She walked slowly into the hall and stopped as the hallway opened into a large room. "Please come into the sitting room. It was my father's favorite place. I'll get us some coffee." Constance smiled as Alfred passed and then went through another door which led to the kitchen.

Alfred looked about the room. It was large, but the immense Victorian furniture seemed to crowd all four corners. The room was decorated in heavy wine-colored velvet. The drapes that hung on the long windows were tied back with thick black-braided roping. On the hard oak floor was a dark Persian rug that had faded with age. A large roll-top desk dominated a corner of the room. On it sat an ancient typewriter and numerous plaques and trophies for writing awards. Alfred went over to the desk. He ran his finger over the grooves in the top. He always wanted a desk like this. A real man's desk, where he could sit and do his bills and paperwork. His hand fell upon the old typewriter. He pushed one of the keys, it made an empty, echoing sound in the still room. Alfred could hear the clock on the fireplace mantle clicking. He felt a light breeze from an open window flow past him.

"That typewriter belonged to my father." Constance startled Alfred with the sudden statement. She was standing near the fireplace with a tray in her hands. He didn't know how long she had been watching him. "Daddy . . . my father, was a correspondent during the war. He was killed in Germany on assignment. Those are the honors he won on the desk."

Alfred looked at Constance, "He must have been very good."

"Yes," she smiled, "he was good, but I was only five when he died."

Alfred gazed at a large oil portrait which hung over the fireplace. "That's your mother," he said.

Constance also looked to the picture. "Yes, when she was young. About twenty-five, I think. You knew her didn't you?"

He still stared at the painting. "Yes, I knew her, but not well. Your mother was quiet and we didn't have much to talk about, I suppose. I was just the milkman."

Alfred studied the young woman on the canvas. She was not smiling, nor was she frowning. But, the artist who painted her had found a sadness in her face and captured it. The overall effect was that this woman lived with a terrible heartache, as one might live with a bad heart or malignant cancer that was forever haunting the background no matter how hard one tried to forget.

Constance was speaking. Alfred made himself turn from the sorrowful face. He apologized. "I'm sorry Constance, I didn't hear what you said."

Constance poured coffee into two cups. "I was just saying that the portrait was painted about three years after my father's death. Do you take cream and sugar?"

"Yes please, that's fine," Alfred replied taking the cup. Once again, his eyes went to the mantel. They followed to a small framed snapshot of a young man in a suit and bowtie. The picture must have been about fifteen years old, he observed. "Is this another relative?" he asked.

Constance stared at the picture. Edward. She thought of him everyday. But always in the past tense. He was gone. Constance had made the choice fifteen years ago. She couldn't have left her mother alone. Edward did not understand, and Edward would not wait. Now, Constance was the one left totally alone.

"Constance?" Alfred touched her shoulder. "Oh," she mused, "he was just an old, old friend." Yes, Edward would always stay in the past tense. She put her cup on the table and leaned on the old-fashioned sofa. "I seem to be doing all the talking. Tell me about you. We've never really had a chance to talk."

"Well," Alfred started, "for being fifty-three, I have a rather short story. I've lived her all my life. Both my parents are dead, but I have a sister who lives in Trenton, New Jersey. Two years ago, I was promoted to senior driver of my company and I get along fine. My parents left me their house on the other side of town, so I get by fine. Yes, I suppose I do just fine."

Constance laughed. It sounded strange, like a sound which didn't come out often from within her. "I'm sure there's a lot more to you than that, Alfred." Just then the old clock on the mantel struck six o'clock. Alfred turned almost all the way around to face Constance. He looked down at the faded rug and to his shiny shoes. He bit down on his teeth and swallowed hard. "Maybe I could think of more to tell you if you would please have dinner with me tonight." He met her gaze. Alfred thought he had never seen a more beautiful pair of eyes. A soft grey, like a pigeon feather he might find on the ground.

"I would like that very much, Alfred," she said. Alfred looked down at the sofa, reached out and covered her hand with his own. "Can I pick you up in an hour? I don't think you'd like to be taken out with me still in my milkman's uniform."

"That would be fine," replied Constance. "I don't think you'd like to take me out in my old green bathrobe."

They both laughed and walked to the front door. "Well, Constance, I'll see you in an hour.

"Yes, I'll be ready. Bye, Alfred."

As she closed the door, Constance could hear Alfred whistling as he walked to his truck. She smiled, and then turned toward the stairs. As she walked up the stairs, she started humming to herself: "Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Constance. Happy birthday to you."

Erin Rose Ryan

(Signet Creative Writing Award—2nd Place Short Story)

Cocktail Talk

The beige-blue cigarette smoke winds
  in and out of tipsy words
swirled into aimless flight
  like small, shrill birds
from vague and empty faces
  weaving through fancy crowds
filling lonely minds with gray-green spaces.

Jan Wolf

The minutest
  detail
    of a January snowflake
Softly melting
  on the
    sunwarmed rooftop
There
  but fleeting
    but oh—
I knew you were there.

Carla Van Cleave

Misfits

Sometimes I don't feel like being me.
I want to put on my painted face
And play my part; the one I play
when I'm gone.
I want a new look because
my old face tanned in the sun
too long.
And they don't like me this dark.
And my cheeks are too rosey.
And my hands too soft.
Because I'm only good
for cleaning and producing;
(The kind of productions that
takes 18 years to complete.)
Real games are for the tough players.
And my nature is too soft for the sport.
So on my stage,
In my play,
I wrote the part
to fit my misfits.
Only . . . It doesn't fit;
On their stage.

Karen Rollins

Time is an Hour Glass

Footprints in the sands of time—
Forever on the shores of eternity—
Planted by the brotherhood of men.
Distorted by the waves of destiny—
Though nonetheless existing—
Affecting time and eternity—
Touching those following behind.
One solitary life—
Influences all others—
Shaping their destiny.
Footprints in the sands of time—
Never washed away by the rolling tides—
Planted by those seemingly insignificant—
Always someone tries to follow the path
Trodden by another.
Footprints in the sands of time—
Scattered along the shores by man, woman, and child—
Memories of special people and places,
And circumstances good and bad.
Time is an hour glass;
Our footprints are its sands.

Janice Riner

You lose your minds—
  O Muses—
O poetic masters of minds—
  Master mine, please
And tell me:
  Who you are?
Who do you think I am—
Do we speak together?
In pre-recorded syllables?

You lose your hearts
  too easily
Muses of mine—
Jerk out of prophetic robes
And,
  Content, lie among the bones—
Know they speak no more—
  tell no lies—
And can never, ever meet your eyes
With pity or understanding.

You lose yourself—
  trip among the ruins
of disillusioned predecessors
  who are still—
And sigh no longer for the
grand illusion of "us."

  Between a whisper and a sigh—
A memory and a smile—
  You see—
Speak, sometimes—
  through the haze
of would-be lovers,
And blank stares—
Where love comes to those
who disregard hearts—
  who see just enough
Not to—
And, when anyone is better
Than no one at all.

Tonya Wertz

Photo by LISA SMITH

All that Glitters

All that glitters,
all that shines,
lights the night,
blinds your mind,
one way street
to a dead end time,
got to get ahead;
never step out of line.
All that glitters,
all that shines,
same old faces,
same old lies,
smiles behind
a wasted mind,
close the door;
pull the blinds.
Never knew how to change the beat,
lost in the shuffle of endless feet,
pushed ahead,
then left behind,
caught up in
the march of time.
All that glitters,
all that shines,
can't please everyone,
don't even try,
never had time to write your own line,
just keep in step,
never mind.

Mary Nethercutt

Computer Programming

When all the problems of the world
are set down and expressed
in exacting calculations
with no emotional mistakes;
When all the workings of the mind
are patterned and explained,
and all emotions, love or hate,
can be bottled and maintained,
then no longer will the human race
be found upon this earth.
We'll all be lifeless mannequins
computerized from birth.

Mary Nethercutt

study

talons scratch across the page
scanning a desert for usable forms of life
black eyes clutch the sight of possible prey
swooping down closer
i pluck the page
and wing it toward my craggy nest
there midst the bits and pieces of former prey
i tear at this with crook and claw
i tug at sinewy tissue
a short tongue jabbing, cramming matter in my mind

this is not what i want

talons coil around the hulk before me
i lift off over the canyon
and leave it to float on its own

Pam Heinig

Christopher

I've watched you
since you were
three days old
and they announced
"another brother" to me
Actually
you looked more like my crinkled feet
after I've stayed
in the cool, brown creek
from breezy mid-morning
to humid, stagnant afternoon.
Eventually, though
you grew
and slightly resembled
a fat new piglet
but instead of a dairy dip curled tail—
you sported
a curly black head.
And one day
you tried walking
like
a young collie pup
who's all paws
tumbling all over himself
But the other day—
when I was home—
I studied you
And the little-boy pudgy hands
and fingers
are slowly disappearing
As if a sculptor
had begun
with a great mound
of moist flesh colored clay
and was nearing
the completion of his
Creation of a hand—
and your curls disappeared
as if a shearer had removed them
one by one in methodical sequence
leaving only straight conventional hairs—
But last night, before I left
I crept into your room
like a ghost of Christmas past
And found
your little child smile
waiting sleepily—

Carla Van Cleave

Laura

She was exquisite. Breathtaking, stunning were the words used to describe her. She floated through the corridors, leaving every man within sight mesmerized as though a mere glance from her crystal-green eyes had immobilized him. The slight toss of her copper mane seemed to send fiery fingers beckoning and people of both sexes responded in kind. She was a gorgeous image, in complete control of the campus that year. Tall and shapely, she dazzled even the most sophisticated of us with a smile that promised magic with no apparent effort. She had everything. She had it all.

The child of successful parents, both world famous, her leisure time was spent at the best country clubs and exotic vacation spots—places we only read about in the society columns. Her designer clothes carried monograms arranged in the most clever places, jumping out at us like happy surprises. The fluffy clouds of cashmere settled in perfect formation about her shoulders, hugging her affectionately with knotted arms.

We were eager to be counted among her friends; and we were, for she was kind. Her generosity was as boundless as her energy. Sharing every pleasure available to her, we spent hours walking the beach in front of her parents' summer home. The winters were spent at their mountain lodge, skiing all day on the surrounding slopes. At night, we toured the village pubs driving the silver Mercedes Convertible, a birthday surprise from her grandfather.

Oh! how we envied her, loving her all the same for she was truly fine—a good person, a rock of stability, happy in her skin. She was filled with laughter that seemed to start at her toes spilling over us much like an invisible celebration, leaving us exhilarated to be part of her existence. Yes, we loved her in our envy without jealousy, and there was not one of us who would not have traded places with her.

We would have traded places with her at any price for her world was utopia. We would have traded anytime, except the day she placed one dainty, well-manicured hand around the silver-plated automatic that exploded her brains with her beauty covering the bathroom floor.

Jan Wolfe

One lone clump of
delicate yellow
buttercups
cleaving tenaciously
to the barrenness
of black precipice.
A miracle.
One lone clump
of vibrant life
fighting against an immense sea
of black death
and managing somehow
to survive.
One lone clump,
its sturdy green shoots
springing like "Jack-in-the-Boxes"
from the dark, rocky clefts
of the precipice,
its tiny white roots
hidden somewhere beneath,
finding little moisture
but persevering,
One lone clump,
its members' heads embracing
azure skies
and absorbing the yellowness
of the sun's hot rays.
One lone clump,
beckoning dark thunderclouds, navy
to come from the distance and spew
wet raindrops, clear
on their yellow-brown, dry faces.
They come slowly.
Meanwhile,
One lone clump,
enduring,
scenting the air with a
springy sweetness
from heaven.

Emily Elyea

The Morning Grass — Haiku

The dew on the grass
Looks like hundreds of diamonds
Sparkling every morn.

Tamara Lynne Wertz

You —
are the snow crystals
falling
restlessly
on my eyelashes
or trapped
to dissolve
on my wet
warm
tongue —

Carla Van Cleave

Sunset

As the sun goes down,
it turns the clouds
into rose colored pillows
for the stars to sleep upon.

Mary Nethercutt

An Unusual Walk

The intense heat wrapped its steamy arms around me, fighting off the occasional late afternoon breeze like a jealous lover. It had been an uncommonly hot day, and in an attempt to deal with my lethargic frame of mind, I had enjoyed a cool shower. Dressed in a pale yellow cotton sundress, I tied my hair up off my neck in a matching ribbon and set out for my usual early evening walk.

As I walked south on Peppercorn Lane, the hustling noises of a busy day dwindled to the sound of children being called in for dinner and a water sprinkler toasting the parched earth. The scent of honeysuckle and charcoal came together, blending in and out of one another.

I stopped at the corner of Main and Elm to treat myself to the last bunch of daisies from the flower man. He sat in his crumpled cigarette package of a truck, patiently waiting to rid himself of the one-eyed soldiers standing in formation across the tailgate. We exchanged pleasantries, never meant to be more than polite comments in passing. "Times is bad," he said. "Builds character," said I. "Hard times don't build character, honey, they just makes you sad and wears you down." I am jolted out of my heat-induced fog by the seriousness of his tone. His eyes are gentle, however, and the contrast of their softness to the hard etched lines in his mahogany face makes me feel foolish for my flippant reply. Who am I to tell this authority about character-building?

I wander aimlessly across Green Street, the flowers my only companion as the last rays of sunlight wave their fiery fingers goodnight before disappearing behind their covers. Feeling somewhat rejuvenated by the exercise, I hasten my pace and detour from my normal route. The luxury of daydreaming has allowed my thoughts to trail playfully behind me like an unleashed puppy. Finally catching me, they nip at my heels for attention and make me aware of my unfamiliar surroundings. I am in a neighborhood of quaint little houses with well-trimmed lawns dwarfed by huge oak trees. There is something electric about the atmosphere, and a new alertness hovers about my head, tapping me on the shoulders as if to say, "Have you noticed the brilliance of those roses hugging the fence?" "Look at the light in the window pressing its nose to the pane to get a better glimpse of the passing stranger."

It is not until I reach the middle of the street that the full impact of the illusion of having been here before surrounds me, like a giant fisherman's net. My eye is drawn to a small brown house with white gingerbread trim. There is nothing about the appearance of the house that is unfriendly, yet I get a heavy, oppressive feeling just walking by. The windows are mountain-stream clear with white shutters covering the bottom. The top shutters are folded back, however, and my gaze is attracted by the hanging ferns and the bookshelves beyond. The shelves are filled with books in confetti jackets, sharing the spaces with what appears to be a collection of small pottery bowls. Clay pots of geraniums guard either side of the entrance, and the house is identified by three large brass helvetica numbers, 932. I am overwhelmed by the desire to pass the house as quickly as possible, to get off the street, and back to my familiar neighborhood.

The thin summer dress is now uncomfortable, and my shivering arms hug myself in an effort to suppress the goose-pimples chasing each other up and down my bare back. My lazy stroll has turned into a trot as I round the corner and race for Green Street, back to Main, and then Elm. It is not until I reach the corner of Peppercorn Lane that I stop to catch my breath and wonder about my strange behavior.

It has been such a long, hot day and I am probably coming down with a bug of some sort. Back in my kitchen, I smile, finding the whole episode rather silly now as the aroma of freshly brewed tea pushes the anxious thoughts to the back of my mind. The tea tray sits on the side of my bed as I nestle into the pale blue pillows. I am feeling quite secure under the fluffy down comforter, and I turn to the fourth chapter of my Agatha Christie mystery. For a fleeting moment the events of the day threaten my peaceful mood. How silly the whole thing now seems, just a case of *deja vu*. I couldn't even remember the street.

It was during the middle of the sixth chapter that the strangest sequence of all began. Images appeared on the backs of my eyelids; faint at first, then sharp and clear. I must have dozed off. I often fall asleep while reading in bed. I sat up, rearranged the bed covers and continued to read until the words were superimposed with the numbers 932. When I appeared puzzled, they became larger and in color; the same brass numbers I had seen earlier in the day. It was as though they were being projected onto the inside of my eyelids from somewhere behind me, in much the same fashion as a rearview projector operates. Each time I questioned what I was seeing, a different slide flashed on, adding a new dimension answering my question. For instance, when I questioned the numbers, a doorframe appeared around it, and then a house. When I questioned the house, a lawn appeared, then a street and so on.

During this time I realized I was not asleep, yet I could not open my eyes. I put my book down and gave this strange happening my full concentration. The images now came more quickly, and the next one was a closeup shot of a window. I recognized the fern hanging from the ceiling, but now in more detail. It was hanging in a natural straw macrame plant swing. I saw the bookcase on the far wall clearly enough to read the titles: *Changing* by Liv Ullman, *Love Stories by New Women* by Swansea and Campbell, *The Women's Room* by Marilyn French, plus numerous books of poetry and art publications. When I wondered what was beyond the bookcase, a sunny yellow kitchen wall appeared. It was at this point the image became that of a moving camera rather than slides. The camera moved about the room highlighting different vignettes: a white parson's table with bentwood chairs with cane seats, purple African violets on the window sill, large copper pots hanging over the stove.

The camera came to rest at the kitchen sink where a beautiful young woman stood preparing dinner. She had short, black curly hair with wonderful dark eyes fringed with the longest eyelashes I had ever seen. She had tan athletic legs that seemed to move about in rhythm with the small radio that sat on the cabinet. She appeared to be washing vegetables for a salad.

The camera moved to a large sliding door, and beyond the door bags of cement were stacked along the edge of a patio. Clearly some work was being done here. Beyond the patio I saw a bottle-green station wagon with a dented right rear fender. Just as the sweeping motion of the camera prepared to scan the yard, I saw movement behind the wagon. My voice broke the stillness of the room, and I heard myself say, "Wait, what is behind the wagon?" The camera in answer reversed its action back to the station wagon and moved forward for a cleaner view. There stood a man about twenty-two years old. He was dressed in khaki pants and a brown plaid shirt. He had black bushy hair that touched his shoulders. He was holding something up to his face. As I questioned the identity of the object, the camera again in response moved closer. The young man was watching the girl through a pair of binoculars. The camera kept sweeping back to the cement bags; and a pattern began to evolve, as it came to rest each time on the fourth bag from the left.

The projector or camera stopped, and for the first time in what seemed like hours I could open my eyes. The clock on the nightstand told me no more than ten minutes had passed. I felt calm and relaxed. While I did not understand what had happened, I was not frightened. I had never believed in the occult and really had not been involved in E.S.P. My intuitive powers were not particularly strong. My experience with the supernatural was limited to reading my horoscope in the daily newspaper.

I slept late the next morning, showering and dressing in a flash, not taking time to linger with the paper and a second cup of coffee. So, it was well into the morning when I saw her photograph. We were passing the corner newsstand. I had been bogged down in the office trying to get out some working drawings for a large interiors project, when my coworker and friend suggested we take a break. We had just passed the stand, when I suddenly said, "Wait! I know that woman!" He said, "You did? Oh, I am so sorry, isn't that terrible?" "Terrible? What?" The alarm in my voice told him I had not read the morning paper. He said, "She was murdered last night." I grabbed the paper, not waiting the pay, and dashed to the nearest coffee shop, reading all the way. "How well did you know her?" I asked him to wait until I read the entire article and I would explain.

The paper stated the woman was found by her husband arriving home for dinner. She had been stabbed repeatedly. There was no suspect and no weapon was found. Her name was Anna Cordle and she lived at 932 Windsor Drive.

After I explained what had happened during my walk the previous evening, my friend accompanied me to the police department. We entered the old graystone building at the Fourth Street entrance and were ushered directly to the officer in charge of the case. The lazy fan above his desk moved in uneven circles, disturbing the air only enough to scatter cigar ashes from the overflowing ashtray on his desk. Somewhere in the background the self-conscious twang of a country singer mourned his wife who had left him with four hungry children and crops in the fields. As we explained why we were there, Sergeant Abernathy leaned back, his ample body spilling over the sides of his swivel chair. His eyes narrowed and he chewed on a toothpick intently as he sized us up. "Yes, he was the officer on the case, and yes, it would be a thorough investigation. Yes, his men were combing the area right now for clues." He continued to answer questions we never asked, more interested in outlining his activities than hearing our comments. "But Sergeant Abernathy, don't you think there could be some validity to my story?" I asked. "Well, uh, your mind does funny things, lady, plays tricks on ya, ya know?" I mean, you were on the street and your imagination could be a little overactive, I mean anytime something sensational hits the papers, we get dozens of calls. People knew the victim or they have premonition, I mean they, well, but you know what I mean? Now why don't you go home and put this right out of your pretty little head. I mean this is a police matter. But thanks for coming in, I mean we appreciate concerned citizens, yes sir, don't think we don't, I mean yes sir . . ." His voice trailed away with his attention, and we knew it was useless to try to recapture either. He had dismissed us as though we had physically vanished. Feeling a little foolish and emotionally depleted, I dropped my friend by his apartment and head for home.

What had triggered that whole series of events? Was my mind playing tricks? Had those fragmented, discursive thoughts been jarred from my subconscious by the realization I had been on the street at approximately the same time the murder had occurred? After a long hot shower, I sat in my robe, drinking brandy until the wee hours of the morning. Gaining no new insight into the situation, I wearily turned out the light and climbed into bed.

It was almost daybreak when I awakened to the sound of splintering glass pelting the brick floor of the sun-porch. The first rays of sunlight were slipping between the bedroom blinds as I bounded from bed. It was all the light I needed to recognize the khaki pants and plaid shirt of the young man I collided with as I ran screaming down the hallway. Seeing his empty hands gave me such relief as I remembered the camera swinging back time after time to the cement bag and the knife. My relief was short-lived, however, as those hands closed around my throat. The struggle had been easy for him. He was much larger than he had appeared standing behind the station wagon in my dream. He was also very strong. But now, I knew for sure it was not a dream. Would Sergeant Abernathy believe me now? That was my last thought as I sank into unconsciousness.

It seemed the screaming would go on forever. It seemed to bounce off the walls, from floor to ceiling. There was no place I could go to escape the terror of its volume. The sound seemed to hover over me, becoming more intense each time I protested. When I felt my eardrums would literally burst, all was silenced by the sharp pain in my arm, and once again I felt myself sliding into unconsciousness. This time I knew I was alive and somehow safe, but I did not know where.

It was several days later that I recognized the screaming voice as mine. It was almost a week before I could control it without the dreaded needle in my arm. It was shortly after the screaming had ceased for good and all sedation had worn off, I became aware of my surroundings for the first time. There was no mistaking the sterile-white and chrome as anything other than a hospital room. The first face I brought into focus was Sergeant Abernathy's. His expression, evenb in my fog, was quite chagrined. "After your visit to the station, I really thought you were just another hysterical female," he said sheepishly. "A lot of kooks come out of the woodwork after a murder, especially that close to the scene. I really didn't think much

about our conversation, but one detail stuck in my mind. It was the part about the murder weapon in the cement bag. After my men came back, having turned up little evidence. I decided to stop by the Cordle house on the way home. The knife was there alright. I brought it back to the station, and we spent most of the night going through arrest records and looking at mug-shots. We were looking for the man you had described. The sun was barely clearing the horizon as I left the station, and, for some reason, I decided to drive by your house on my way home. You can imagine my surprise to see a green station wagon, just as you had mentioned, parked across the street. Shortly after spotting the broken door on your sun-porch, I heard your screams, and, and, well, I'm sorry.

"How did he find me?"

Sergeant Abernathy explained the murderer had seen me walking past the house. He had seen me through the windows with his binoculars, as he was watching the girl. When I had started to run, he thought it was because I had seen him. Since I was walking, he assumed I was from the neighborhood or not too far away. It was by chance he had seen me leaving the police department and had followed me home. He had hidden outside my bedroom window, waiting for the lights to go out and giving me time to fall asleep.

The events of the last week had finally taken their toll. I could feel myself slipping into a relieved and exhausted sleep. Sergeant Abernathy patted my foot as he tiptoed out. "I am sorry, really sorry, little lady, I, I . . ." "Everything worked out fine," I mumbled. "You were there when I needed you." We exchanged a smile that said all was forgiven, and I sank into oblivion.

Jan Wolf

the voice lesson

"to sing correctly
  you must first learn how to breathe
stand before me and place your hands on my lower rib cage
  fingers curving around my sides
  thumbs slanting toward my Xiphoid cartilage
here at the base of the sternum
right
now feel while i sing—then it's your turn"
standing there with my hands around this woman i felt uneasy
  but i didn't have time to think about it
she raised her body
  as if she were one of the Queen's guards taking his post
she then began the exercise
the air whistled almost inaudibly as she inhaled
  sounding like the breathing of a sleeping child
  and her muscles—
  once stretched as tightly as a rubber glove
  about a surgeon's hand—
  relaxed
her ribs floated beneath my touch
there was no tension beneath her skin
  none at all

my hands began to rise
  as if holding a helium balloon inside a whalebone corset
the balloon filled
  then a constrictor about her chest, a ring of muscles
  tried to strangle her lungs
a column of air rushed up her throat
it surged violently past Quiana folds
  they trembled
the air rose still higher
  pummeling against the skull mask of her face
it reminded me of prison movies
  with the inmates trying to batter down doors
but oddly enough
  it wasn't a shriek of torture
  that emanated from her body

no
  a light soprano shimmered in the air
  so clear in pitch and controlled in resonance
  i could feel a soft vibration in my own face
it tingled like a spring rain against my skin
touched, my whole body smiled
"now it's your turn"

Pam Heinig

Changing Trains (Of Thought)

Somewhere
  down
    below
      at the very
        pit of me

        new high.
      to a
    rocket
  of fear
Those thoughts

        Pushingthemallaside
        I miss that doubt trip

and the train pulls away at a level pace.

Jan Wolf

Photo by LISA SMITH

Oedipus Rednecks

Prather banged the screen door, swaggered into the front room, dropped his 190 pound bulk on the Early American Reproduction sofa with maple veneer arms and feet, and put his boots on the Reproduction Cobler's Bench that stood in front, centered on a braided rag rug.

His mother recognized the sounds. "Pra-therrr! You, Prather. Get your feet off of my coffee table." She followed her crow voice into the front room where she pushed her knees against her son's outstretched legs, flicking his kinky blond head with her dish towel. "I told you three dozen and two times to keep your ferry boats off of my furniture."

He reached out and swatted her abundant rump. "Sweet little ole womern."

She crinkled up the corners of her mouth but failed to suppress a grin. "Go on now. Supper ain't even started yet. Go out and play. Go out and chase girls."

"Mama, you know I don't chase girls. They chase me, and sometimes, if I'm in a good mood, I let one catch me."

Like a jointed ruler, he bent his angular limbs, one at a time, for rising; stood up to his full 6'4", then lifted his mother so their eyes were even. They mirrored each other, reflecting the same transparent blue that clear lake water assumes under an overcast sky.

"Ransom eyes," she had told him. She was a Ransom. "Your daddy's were brown," she had told him.

He kissed her stubby nose and set her down. "Reckon I'll go down to Carmichael's to see if anybody wants to go huntin' tonight."

"You do that. But mind me, Prather, you come home fyll of beer, I'm feedin' your pork chop to the dog."

"Sweet little ole womern." He crossed the red clay yard, swept clean by his mother's ceaseless broom, to his pickup truck. While he was making up his mind, he idled the engine, listening to the static on the CB. There were alternatives. He could go to Jake's and shoot pool. He could go to Nadine's and pay good money for sex he could get free anytime he felt like it. He could go out on I-85 to tease James Murdock who was sure to be parked behind a highway sign in his patrol car. It was fun to park 50 yards up the road from Murdock and warn all the CBers of Smokey's presence, then ride past him, beeping his horn and giving him the high sign at precisely 55 miles per hour.

Once the decision had been made, Prather saw no need for delay, so he slammed into first, careening down the rutted drive that led to the highway.

When he pulled onto the gravel apron at Carmichaels, he saw by their cars that Doc Pruitt and Bobby Hague were already there—must have stopped by when they finished their shift at the furniture plant.

When Prather pushed open the door, he went from the 72-degree bright mountain afternoon air into a smoke-filled, neon-lit, spilled-beer, air conditioned atmosphere. He gave a small sigh of satisfaction.

From one of the three booths, Bobby and Doc nodded their recognition of his arrival. He got his own Miller's from the cooler and joined them. "Hey, how you guys doing? How's the wife, Doc? Bobby, you got any complaints?"

The three young men exchanged "fine's" and "How you's" and "Hell no's" in ritual pantomime made necessary by the decibel level of Tammy Wynette's "D-I-V-O-R-C-E" blasting from the juke box in the corner. Carmichael, who thought it was the saddest song he'd ever heard, loved it and always turned up the volume when one of his customers made that choice.

Prather reached up and jerked a pack of peanuts from the rack behind his head, split them open and laid the pack in the middle of the table in a sharing gesture.

"Your mama won't like it if you stuff yourself and spoil your supper," Bobby said to him seriously.

"I know it. Here, you all eat some. They just make me thirsty for more beer and mama gets mad if I drink too much."

"Yeah, she'll whup your butt," Doc said with a grin.

Prather's friends were permitted tasteful, respectful jokes about his mother, but they were careful. They remembered the seventh grade when he'd sent the McAllister boy to the hospital because of a name he'd called Prather which reflected on his mother. Poor kid was new that year and, knowing nothing about Prather's background, thought he was applying a general epithet.

The hosiery mill let out at 4:00 and six or seven more regulars came in.

"Hey, Buck, how's it going?"

"Jippy, is that your brother running for sheriff over to McDowell County?"

"Hey, Bobby, you still want to sell that pointer pup? I know a guy who wants one."

"How about what Richard Petty did at Martinsville? I took my wife and kids up there. It beat anything I ever seen."

"Don't let on I told you, but Burt Jones run off some good white stuff last week and he might let you buy a jar off of him if he thought you was the right kind of man."

"They wanted to get up this bowling team over at the plant, but when Jess said we had to ask the nigger foreman we told him, nice and easy, where he could stick his goddam idea."

By six o'clock, the conversation was almost loud enough to drown out the juke box, the neon lights were dim in the smoke which the air conditioner only swirled. Carmichael was serving the beer himself so he could keep up with the money, saying a concilliatory word every now and then as his customers got more strident. One older man in particular whom nobody seemed to know was trying to call attention to himself. "When I was a young man in these parts, we didn't put up with no riff-raff. We run 'em out of town.

"We got a right good little town here, Mister. When did you live in Carville?"

"Didn't say 'here." Said 'in these parts.' Every man looked after his own. Won't no government handouts for them that didn't want to work."

Since every man in the place had already put in 8 hours that day at either the hosiery mill or the furniture factory, ominous noises left their throats and collected around the man in a threatening wave. Carmichael clarified it. "You wasn't speaking of present company, I'm certain."

"Oh, hell no. I wouldn't of said it if I was." He turned back to his beer, tried to light his cigarette with a pack of soggy matches. Nobody offered. He had to ask Carmichael for a light.

He was still a tall man, but constant slouching had diminished him. His nose, probably broken in a barroom fight, had healed with a hump in the bridge so that when he peered from behind it with sunken brown eyes, he looked like a dissipated eagle.

He felt his isolation. He tried to vindicate himself. "You boys know what I mean. Folks like you and me, good, honest working people, has got to pay taxes so the shiftless no 'counts can set on their asses and draw welfare. It's them kind what don't work during the week nor go to church of a Sunday what gets good ole boys in trouble."

There were a few murmurs of understanding and approval which encouraged him to continue.

"Being in these parts reminds me of a worthless old cuss named Ransom who used to have a few acres over by the river."

The hush which fell on the beer drinkers he attributed to his art as a raconteur, so he was further encouraged.

"Never coulda raised much there 'cept chickens and some scrawny corn. My own poppa said he should of got him a job at the mill, but his old womern died and left him with a pretty young daughter named Ora, as I remember, and he wouldn't leave her. Goes to show you some folks ain't got the gumption it takes to turn a dollar."

When Prather got up from the table he knocked over the pyramid of beer cans he and Doc had built there. The noise they made in falling was so startling, especially in the tense atmosphere, that most of the men jumped, cursed, laughed, wiped their nervous, sweaty hands on their pants.

" 'Scuse me, Mister," Prather said to the man as he slowly approached him. "I couldn't help but overhear what you said about a family that lived over by the Big Toe River. You recollect what happened to that young girl?"

"Sure do. She was a cunnin' little bitch. Got herself knocked up. I had to leave this part of the country about then, but I head tell her old man was so wrought up, he killed hisself. But that was long before your time, son. What's your interest in . . ."

"Mister," Prather grabbed a fistful of the older man's jacket. "I ain't never killed a man in cold blood before, but I won't stand on principles this time. However, if you got a weapon, you'd best show it."

The man, not eager for a fight, opened his mouth to placate, but when he saw Prather reach for the hunting knife he always carried in his boot, he knew he was in peril. Then he became aware of Prather's lakewater eyes; seemed to read an answer there. With resignation, he reached backward to his empty beer bottle and broke it on the counter. "I never knowed, son." As he swung the jagged glass just short of Prather's adam's apple, he repeated, "I never knowed."

Prather plunged the knife deep into the man's chest. In the moment of his dying, he stretched out his arms like a supplicant, fell forward with his face on his killer's shoulder. Prather looked into that face and, with horror, saw there something of himself.

Ann Matthews

(Signet Creative Writing Award—1st Place Short Story)

An absurd notion:
I slid down a rainbow
Rolled on my side
Bathed in its colors
Swam in its lights
Stroked the tart yellow with my tongue—
Scratched my back with a bright red streak—
Rolled the leprechaun green into a tight
concentric ball—
While the ultra-violet blue taunted my memory—
I had been in search of the gold
But suddenly I tripped over a thick black cord
extinguishing
the colors of promise—

Carla Van Cleave

(Signet Creative Writing Award—1st Place Poetry)

Midsummer Holiday Number

And in your
midsummer holiday number—
jitter-jazz your way through
and let's change partners—
but, Oh—don't let the music stop . . .
so good
at your back-step-two-step
and, Oh, you dance divinely
—fling me a toothless smile
and every song is your favorite song.

In your
midsummer night's dream
So Titania-like-heartbreaker-like
and still—change partners—
but, Oh—your Shakespearean rag—
time jingle—
got the steps but you've missed the beat—
and, Oh—you dance divinely—
thank you, ma'am, right this way, ma'am
your five-cent cheap shot we-rent-by-the-hour
Liberty Motel holiday romance
is waiting—Room 69 and
Oh—don't let the music stop . . .

And in your
midsummer mind's eye
see the words—
understand the song—
only for a moment.
And in the morning—
the moon is in the sky—
you looked from
the other window
and didn't see—
too cut and dry
too night and day
and in the morning,
you didn't change partners.

Now your
midsummer holiday number
is over—
last chance
for your
midsummer holiday fling
(Let's leave the romance out)
in your
midsummer holiday dream
you can close your eyes
pretend
act out your
midsummer holiday fantasy
close your eyes—
(this won't hurt a bit) and
call another's name but
once the music stops—
(Don't let the music stop . . .)

In the moonsilver twilight
face your partner,
hold out both hands—
they will grip air
and the whispered song
will slip through your fingers
like moonbeams and pearls.

Tonya Wertz

(Signet Creative Writing Award—3rd Place Poetry)

You
flicker
on
and
Off
like so many
fireflies
in the North Carolina pines.

Carla Van Cleave

Harry

Me sitting at the bar
You standing against the brick wall

A sparkle of our eyes and
An alley-cat grin on
Our faces

A pair we became for a few hours
In that crowded, smoky bar

Our first date—we met at the
Stonehenge
I was thirty minutes late
The restaurant had run out of
Roast beef
So we settled on
Turkey

At that little table we sat
Two feet from each other
We barely talked—
We just looked at each other and
Flashed those unforgettable
Cat smiles.

My old boyfriend and
My smart mouth—
We parted—but only after both
Trying to put in the
Last word.

A few months later we caught
Glimpses
But only waved
At that new crowded, smoky bar

A couple of months more and
I saw you there again
With a drink in one hand I
Cautiously approached you
The conversation flowed and
A month later we were
Dating

—Holding hands at the movies
—Playing pinball with the devil
—Stuffing our faces with peanuts
and pretzels
—Watching TV at home
—Sleeping with the kitty cats

My ever-shy personality opened
Up one night with some of
My deepest thoughts

You were never heard from again
Maybe, just maybe we'll both
Find a new little bar in a
Few months.

And we'll catch
Glimpses of each
Other and smile
. . . like alley cats—

Ellen Lindsay

Lying beside me
the moonlight cascades across
your lithe frame.
Your presence fills my being,
lowering my defenses,
flooding my mind.
To know, to love, to feel . . .

With each caress
past pain is erased,
all doubt slowly slipping away.
Once again I feel whole, content,
your smile filling the inner void
you left before.

And yet I know
there is no room in your life for anyone
but yourself.
To know, to love, to feel.
Please set me free,
don't haunt me forever . . .

Deborah Correll

To Joan
On The Demise Of Her Love Affair

The dent in my car fender
no larger than
the dent in your heart
it bleeds
rusts
but drives on.
While insurance rates rise
brick by brick
to hide the rust
the hurt.
Your heart
a walled-in thorn bush is
pain-sharpened.
Keep it in cold storage.
Recall the scent.
Sustain the bloom
and a rose's memory will linger
to smile from the heart
once more.

Colleen Turnage

Relating, Relationships And Other Fairytales.

I got over it.
Like a con man
gets over on a patsy.
Like the cow got over
the moon.
I got over it.
And though it was
much like
a junkie getting over smack,
I triumphed just the same.

I took all the "Babe you
know I didn't mean it,"
entertwined it with the
"I swear that was the last time,"
and passed them away
in the toilet
with the rest of my waste;
thus wiping my tail free of your excuses.

Relating with you
was like making it with
fast time.
And though many times
the wall was my main source
of articulate conversation,
I just knew my name was
Sleeping Beauty, not yet
awakened from a bad realism.

I was slapped by a hardened
fantasy that had already been
lived in and understandably
discarded by the previous owner.
(The warranty had long since expired.)
But after the dirt was brushed off
it fit, like a tattered glove.

I got over it,
kicked it aside,
trampled up and down its sides.
And pretty much the way the
unknown soldier survived the war,
I made it through yet another relationship.

Karen Rollins

Up and down
On a merry-go-round
Ride with you.
And—always around
and around and around—
Your voice makes me dizzy
Mouthing whispery untruths—
A vicious circle . . .

This year at the fair
You can ride all the rides—
I got your pass
for you—
(didn't even have to ask, this year)—

This year you can laugh at the
Fat lady, the skinny man—
Your own image in those
Distorted mirrors.

This year you can watch the
Tightrope walker's juggling steps
—watch him fall—
(someone'll be there with a net—
they always are—)

And this year at the fair,
The tightrope walker
might lose his balance
But he'll be okay—
You'll see.

Tonya Wertz

Summertime Ending

Wasn't it just
  last year
when you took
  my hand
    strolling down
the leaves dancing
    about our feet
and you said
  goodbye
i said
  nothing
    nothing to say
now i say
  goodbye
    we've both found
what we were
  searching for
    in
each other
i'll still think of you
    from time to time
as you may think of me
and another time will pass away unnoticed.

Joan Oviatt

A Silent Argument

I sat frozen, uncomfortable on my
  icy block of madness
laser-eyes etching holes into your
  sterile face, oh sadness,
at my failing to spark a glimmer
  to warm my wounded ego, so
without any talk, I gathered my hurt
  and walked into the snow.

Jan Wolf

So I laugh—
  don't you know
    just a little
  too loud
    when your name surfaces
      Dorsal fin
        like
  protruding out of the
    briny water
      trickling
    on my face
  but
    you'll never know
      for sure
  I still care—

Carla Van Cleave

To unpeel you—
  (get under your skin)
To unnerve you and totally
  undo you,
I need one of those lightning bright
sharp Cutco knives
  for the operation.

To peel your ripe and too red
tomatoskin thin wrappings—
I need clear glass cellophane,
to lock in your freshness
until I'm ready to
  slice you—
  halve you—
Red Sea ripe juice
will run like rain
  down a windowpane.

And after the dissection
I withdraw my blade—
Wipe the Cutco knife clean—
  Find it
  Not dulled by your skin.

Tonya Wertz

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